

Chapter four.

Boneclaw soon found Owl-caller near the lean-to in the woods where Hole-in-the-skull spent most of his time, or at least, where his body spent most of its time. You could never tell with shamans. The female shaman, Skin-turner had been even worse¹, but one day she had jus up and wandered off. Boneclaw wondered vaguely if she was still alive. No-one of The People would harm a Shaman, the few wild predators capable of taking a Person as prey had soon learnt that doing so resulted in a slow, spearing related death if they made a habit of it, and humans and dwarfs were smart enough to know trouble when they saw it (at least a third of the time). Still, they were less weird than Ghost-eaters: Boneclaw's tribe did not have a Ghost-eater at the moment, but she'd met another tribe's once and had no intention of doing so again. But Skin-turner was still a weird one. Apart from channelling the essence of various animals (and the smell, she'd had the largest collation of reeking, badly tanned hides Boneclaw had ever seen), there was the fact that she didn't seem to consider herself female (or a hyena about half of the time, but that was another issue). She'd worn male shaped beads, ignored the duties, rites and rituals or females, and declared ownership of a hearth, something only a male could do. She also decided that as a male, hunting was not her job, and so she had just turned up at other people's doors at dinner time and glared pointedly at people until gave her the hearth-rite and invited her in, where as if any normal adult female had tried it she'd end up very lucky is she wasn't invited to step outside of the camp and eat fist. But that was the tradition; shamans drew power from being outside of everything. Elk-mother had said that when she was a girl, male shamans had been treated as childless females, even going so far as to be permitted to sleep in the hall of Childless Females². Strangely the practice had been ended by the elders

¹ As in many cultures, practising shamans in The People were outside of normal social conventions in regards to such things as gender, economic-rolls and personal hygiene. Living outside of the constrains of time, space, life, death and species, or at least thinking you do after ingesting extremely dangerous local fungi, makes living within the little tiny rules of society tricky at best of times.

² Housing was a problem amongst The People as by law and custom, males could do two things that females could not: own property, and move to a different tribe within the tribes of the People (whereas females were stuck in the tribe they were born into for life, males could and did leave tribes to marry elsewhere*. This helped stop inbreeding). As for property things got complicated. Females could only own clothing, weaponry, jewellery, ancestor-fetishes, a fire-flint, family heirlooms and a sleeping-roll. They could be *custodians* of other property, but it was either owned by males or by The Tribe itself. This created a problem as to where females lived. Children lived with their parents, married females with their mates, Elders in the ceremonial Dogun's provided for their use (unless they had mates of surviving brothers, which most did: doguns were primarily for receiving guests to hear their complaints, appeals and requests, and so were not built for great comfort on the basis that if they were you'd only encourage people to drop in to complain) but childless females were an loose end. An dangerous, hormonal, status obsessed heavily-armed loose end, and so one which by custom got given its own dogun-sized and dogun- comfortable hall as far away from the living area of males and families as possible in the camp compound. When a Young couple married, the family of the male would build them a hut and raise them a hearth in the family end of the compound, and the female would, on the wedding night light the fire in the hearth for the first time, and the male would ensure it never went out again and it was all very symbolic and lovey-dovey. And the ownership of the hut would be the males, unless the two split up, in which case the male would go back to his brothers hearth, and the female to the Hall, and the fire in the hearth would burn out, and the hut, like the marriage, fall into ruin (In practice, because being a hunter-gather builds a certain practicality of mindset, the hut only *symbolically* fell into ruin: in reality it was fairly rapidly and neatly dismantled as other families nicked the building materials to build or repair their own hunts, but it's the thought that counts). The only oddities were when the father of a family died, in which case the eldest son inherited everything, including the responsibilities of caring for the entire family, and although the mother would, as soon as all her children were of age, move out and either re-marry or go back to the hall leaving her son free, any sisters would stay with the male until they (the sisters) married, and the male had to care for

without explanation in Elk-mother's day, at around the same time a large number of Childless Females suddenly weren't.

She jogged up two Owl-caller, who was holding a large basket of backwards-salt, and pulled him to one side.

"I believe your sister's version of events, and am willing to intervene on her behalf, if I can."

them before all other duties, including his own marriage, or until they left of their own will. As a result a great many females were crammed into a small, stuffy Hall with no privacy, and Owl-caller was trapped in a lonely place that smelt of his dead parent's life, with a violently drunken wreck for company.

*Provided, of course, that the tribes they wanted to marry into were A, of The People (I.e. they spoke the one language of all true People and could trace their descent from one of She-is-fiercer's seven daughters, rather than just being a sentient hyena who spoke something else, who were not people *really*, just rather bright animals, and not to be considered as husbands unless the inbreeding got truly desperate) and B, the two tribes were not at war. War was, amongst The People, an occupational hazard. Mostly war consisted of a group of warriors escorting one warrior to the camp of a rival tribe so she could do battle in single combat with the enemies of all that was right and good; so in practice it was a nice day out, a chance to meet some distant relatives and catch up, and do a little trading whilst the only females on each side who actually had an argument beat the ever-loving out of each other over such great matters of state as Who Said What About Our Hook-teeth at Tall-Spots Wedding. Things seldom ended in deaths, and if they did then the war would just escalate up to the next level, groups of seven warriors standing twenty paces apart and shouting war-cries and lobbing spears until each side had suffered a fatality, in which case any deaths caused by People were avenged, the score was evened and both sides could have a joint funeral feast. If that failed to result in a definitive result, then the seven would swear to get vengeance or die, even at the expense of dyeing as Trash-People, in which case the winners won by favour of the gods, and the losers were marked by the gods as trash people and so by definition *no vengeance was required and this whole thing could be put to bed now with no further deaths thank you very much!* The only exceptions to this were when a male or child was killed in malice, in which case rather than the theatrical battles of open war, a spearing party of every female the Tribe could muster would hit the enemy hard and fast at night, kill the perpetrator, wipe out all their adult female relatives to break the back of any possible retaliation, burn the camp to the ground, and steal away either a male or a child to replace the one taken from them and to act as a hostage in the event of retaliation, or, an odd exception to the rules, husband-seeking: as minor, relatively bloodless wars were common males would often find themselves unable to marry their sweetheart, or a girl from another tribe due to the two tribes nominally being enemies. In this situation, males would often have a quiet word with the local shaman, who could move freely between tribes even in war, who would then have a word with the tribe's elders, and go over to the rival tribe and have a word with *their* elders, and then a few weeks later a war-party led by the young male's beloved would sneak into the compound and make off with the male in the dead of night whilst all the sentries or females who may have defended him were mysteriously otherwise engaged and that way no-one died or had to lose face by seeing the raiding party but not fighting it. And the tribe that had their male stolen would shake their heads and say Dear me, those utter utter bastards, what sort of person kidnaps a defenceless male like that? and then do nothing about it because, after all, they were a cute pair, and they wanted to be together after all, it *did* prevent the shame of the male running away like some harlot, and it did help prevent in-breeding. And then in a month, two months, six months time when the two tribes were at peace again, the male would invite all his relatives and friends from his old tribe over for a second wedding feast and everyone would slap him on the back and congratulate him, and then congratulate his Wife/kidnapper and then say to their new in-laws Isn't it *good* to see the old-ways being maintained, I mean call me old fashioned, but I think its Romanic to see a nice young female like that make the *effort* to carry out a full-blown kidnapping raid. And then they'd drink a bit too much mead and say something like Mind you, the kids these days, not a patch on the kidnappings you used to get when I was a girl, and no offence to your young Fleet-paw, but in *my* day in *our* tribe, when we kidnapped ourselves a husband we did it *properly*...

Owl-caller tried to hide his surprise as he put-down the basket. He'd expected her to take longer to figure it out.

"So you worked out that since you and my sister were still hunt-sisters at the time my father died, you are entitled to help her?" then his brain caught up with his ears. "Wait, what do you mean 'if you can'?"

"What, I can do that? Oh. Good. No that's not why I wanted to talk to you about it listen! I-" she paused. Hole-in-the-skull had materialised out of the woods about thirty paces away and was watching with apparent interest.

"What's he doing." Owl-caller looked. He then sighed.

"We'll he's too far away to be ease-dropping, but he's not letting us out of his sight, so I'd guess chaperoning."

"Chaperoning, why?"

"Because I'm a respectable young male, and you're Boneclaw. Sorry." He looked at her and his eyes narrowed slightly. "You take that as a complement, don't you?"

"Who, me? No." She lied. "Listen!" she picked him up by his shoulders and propped him up against a tree in a slight hollow in the bark and leaned in so Hole-in-the-skull couldn't get a look at their faces; she'd heard he could see words as they formed. Owl-caller seemed quite alarmed by this, and to her complete (but not entirely unwelcome surprise) his ears flushed red and he wrinkled his nose in embarrassment . *He's blushing. Dear god's is my reputation really that bad? Hey, at least I've still, got it.* She thought.

Owl-caller's thinking however was running more on the lines of *Dear god's she picked me up! She actually picked me up. What does she think I am, a sack of pemmican she can just move about when it suits her!* He felt himself flush red with anger under his fur. Then he wrinkled his nose and frowned. *And dear GODS what has she been up to? She reeks of boar guts! How the HELL does everyone apparently find her sexually attractive?*

Boneclaw told him, briefly, what had happened by the brook and why it meant she now believed Eagle-Owl's version of events, as Owl-caller listened and slowly felt his anger slip away. Okay, maybe this was something they couldn't risk Hole-in-the-skull finding out about, and so perhaps in her excitement he could overlook being man-handled if it, wisely, put them out of line of sight of his word-seeing. He did however continue to breathe only through his mouth and glare angrily at her throughout the explanation, unaware that to Hole-in-the-skull it just made him look like he was panting, which combined with Boneclaw's whispering and both parties evident air of trying to act casual whilst under the control of intense strong feelings left Hole-in-the-skull in no doubt as the nature of the conversation (ultimately resulting in Owl-caller spending his next few lessons on healing being restricted, to his acute embarrassment, solely to the area of reproductive health).

Unaware of the world-shattering embarrassment and endless mocking from his friends awaiting in his immediate future, he cocked his head on one side and looked deep into Boneclaw's eyes, trying to guess if she was taking the piss or not (causing Hole-In-The-Skull to make several mental notes about various physical and medical aids he suddenly needed to teach Owl-caller about, but that's neither here nor there).

"You said that a small dark shape fled from your shadow and the bigger one went after it?"

"As far as we could tell, yes."

"Interesting, was there anywhere shady you stopped for any time."

"There was the gully where we killed the boar, yes."

"Right, well you may have picked up the thing there then." Said Owl-caller, resisting the temptation to add *So you've been boar-hunting? Would never have guessed.* "You said the big one may not be able to move through bright light? In which case these... *things* may find themselves stuck in patches of shadow during the day, and only be able to move around at night, like fish stuck in rock-pools waiting for a tide, or Pikkas, false lemmings and mountain tribbles who overheat if they come down from their mountain homes in the day, but can move between them seeking mates during the night."

"What do you think it is?"

"No idea. I can ask Hole-in-the-skull later. Magical and god-stuff creatures are one of his areas of expertise, and I think I can ask that without making him too suspicious." Boneclaw looked nonplussed, but then shrugged. "Okay, not much to go on but better than any ideas I have right now. You go to it. I should probably get back to the camp, they'll be expecting me to saunter in victorious and boast about my kill 'round about now. I'll try and tell the elders I saw something big moving in the Deepwood and I don't think any children of males should go there without escort or at night, but I'll say I thought it was probably a bear. No wait, I'll say it was something small and say I thought I smelt a skunk: If I say bear they'll go and try to hunt it." She looked down at herself "Although even I'd be hard pressed to smell a skunk over this unless it went off. Good sized boar, but messy bugger, and the dumb things are wiffy at the best of times." She saw Owl-caller's tortured expression and then stepped backwards letting him set out from up against the tree, and then after a moments further thought she moved downwind from him.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Not that bad. Making backwards-salt is worse."

"Really?" As far as she knew, it was just funny salt.

"Yeah, but it really aids food preservation. Thanks for...thanks for believing my sister, Boneclaw, even if it was only after seeing that ... thing."

"No spit³. It's not like I could stand by and pretend nothing happened after seeing that." *although it would make life so much easier. Too late now. A hunt-leader takes responsibility.* "I've got to go."

"Right. We need to meet aging tomorrow, discuss this" He called to her as she turned to go. *Okay so she's not an utter jerk, but the way some of the males faun over her. I still don't see what's so impressive.*

Boneclaw stopped. "Wait a sec, I've got something for you." She said loudly reaching into a pouch at the front of her loin-cloth (making Hole-in-the-skull flush red). "It should still be dry enough." Owl-Caller hesitated, and then reached out to take the item she offered him quickly before Hole-in-the-skull could see it. He kept it closed tight in his palm as he casually waved her off, and only unfolded his paw when she was gone.

³ Hyenas do not perspire, they cool their bodies via panting.

It was a horseshoe fungus. They were not valuable, not really. You couldn't eat them and they had no hallucinogenic properties, despite all the local shamans had tried. But they did smoulder nicely, burning very slowly over a long time. As males tended the hearths, they were needed by males to carry fire safely, but because every male needed them, the trees near camp were picked bare by this point in spring. *She must have noticed that I wasn't wearing one when she caught me in the tree the other day, because climbing a tree with a hot ember dangling from your belt is for braver and more foolish hyenas than I, and she must have thought I had run out and fetched one.* It was not the gift a female gave to a male. It was practical, simple, unromantic, ugly even, and she'd made no show of giving it. In fact she'd almost forgotten. It was the sort of thing, however, that one Person gave to another. She'd treated him as a member of The People first, not a male first, he thought. And she didn't even think about it.

Alright, maybe she has some redeeming features. But she's still not getting within a spear's length of me again unless she's had a bath.